

A DEFENCE OF PLANETS

A book has at one time come under my notice called 'Terra Firma: the Earth not a Planet.' The author was a Mr. D. Wardlaw Scott, and he quoted very seriously the opinions of a large number of other persons, of whom we have never heard, but who are evidently very important. Mr. Beach of Southsea, for example, thinks that the world is flat; and in Southsea perhaps it is. It is no part of my present intention, however, to follow Mr. Scott's arguments in detail. On the lines of such arguments it may be shown that the earth is flat, and, for the matter of that, that it is triangular. A few examples will suffice:

One of Mr. Scott's objections was that if a projectile is fired from a moving body there is a difference in the distance to which it carries according to the direction in which it is sent. But as in practice there is not the slightest difference whichever way the thing is done, in the case of the earth 'we have a forcible overthrow of all fancies relative to the motion of the earth, and a striking proof that the earth is not a globe.'

This is altogether one of the quaintest arguments we have ever seen. It never seems to occur to the author, among other things, that when the firing and falling of the shot all take place upon the moving body, there is nothing whatever to compare them with. As a matter of fact, of course, a shot fired at an elephant does actually often travel towards the marksman, but much slower than the marksman travels. Mr. Scott probably would not like to contemplate the fact that the elephant, properly speaking, swings round and hits the bullet. To us it appears full of a rich cosmic humour.

I will only give one other example of the astronomical proofs:

'If the earth were a globe, the distance round the surface, say, at 45 degrees south latitude, could not possibly be any greater than the same latitude north; but since it is found by navigators to be twice the distance--to say the least of it--or double the distance it ought to be according to the globular theory, it is a proof that the earth is not a globe.'

This sort of thing reduces my mind to a pulp. I can faintly resist when a man says that if the earth were a globe cats would not have four legs; but when he says that if the earth were a globe cats would not have five legs I am crushed.

But, as I have indicated, it is not in the scientific aspect of this remarkable theory that I am for the moment interested. It is rather with the difference between the

flat and the round worlds as conceptions in art and imagination that I am concerned. It is a very remarkable thing that none of us are really Copernicans in our actual outlook upon things. We are convinced intellectually that we inhabit a small provincial planet, but we do not feel in the least suburban. Men of science have quarrelled with the Bible because it is not based upon the true astronomical system, but it is certainly open to the orthodox to say that if it had been it would never have convinced anybody.

If a single poem or a single story were really transfused with the Copernican idea, the thing would be a nightmare. Can we think of a solemn scene of mountain stillness in which some prophet is standing in a trance, and then realize that the whole scene is whizzing round like a zoetrope at the rate of nineteen miles a second? Could we tolerate the notion of a mighty King delivering a sublime fiat and then remember that for all practical purposes he is hanging head downwards in space? A strange fable might be written of a man who was blessed or cursed with the Copernican eye, and saw all men on the earth like tints clustering round a magnet. It would be singular to imagine how very different the speech of an aggressive egoist, announcing the independence and divinity of man, would sound if he were seen hanging on to the planet by his boot soles.

For, despite Mr. Wardlaw Scott's horror at the Newtonian astronomy and its contradiction of the Bible, the whole distinction is a good instance of the difference between letter and spirit; the letter of the Old Testament is opposed to the conception of the solar system, but the spirit has much kinship with it. The writers of the Book of Genesis had no theory of gravitation, which to the normal person will appear a fact of as much importance as that they had no umbrellas. But the theory of gravitation has a curiously Hebrew sentiment in it--a sentiment of combined dependence and certainty, a sense of grappling unity, by which all things hang upon one thread. 'Thou hast hanged the world upon nothing,' said the author of the Book of Job, and in that sentence wrote the whole appalling poetry of modern astronomy. The sense of the preciousness and fragility of the universe, the sense of being in the hollow of a hand, is one which the round and rolling earth gives in its most thrilling form. Mr. Wardlaw Scott's flat earth would be the true territory for a comfortable atheist. Nor would the old Jews have any objection to being as much upside down as right way up. They had no foolish ideas about the dignity of man.

It would be an interesting speculation to imagine whether the world will ever develop a Copernican poetry and a Copernican habit of fancy; whether we shall ever speak of 'early earth-turn' instead of 'early sunrise,' and speak indifferently of looking up at the daisies, or looking down on the stars. But if we ever do, there are really a large number of big and fantastic facts awaiting us, worthy to make a new mythology. Mr. Wardlaw Scott, for example, with genuine, if unconscious,

imagination, says that according to astronomers, 'the sea is a vast mountain of water miles high.' To have discovered that mountain of moving crystal, in which the fishes build like birds, is like discovering Atlantis: it is enough to make the old world young again. In the new poetry which we contemplate, athletic young men will set out sturdily to climb up the face of the sea. If we once realize all this earth as it is, we should find ourselves in a land of miracles: we shall discover a new planet at the moment that we discover our own. Among all the strange things that men have forgotten, the most universal and catastrophic lapse of memory is that by which they have forgotten that they are living on a star.

In the early days of the world, the discovery of a fact of natural history was immediately followed by the realization of it as a fact of poetry. When man awoke from the long fit of absent-mindedness which is called the automatic animal state, and began to notice the queer facts that the sky was blue and the grass green, he immediately began to use those facts symbolically. Blue, the colour of the sky, became a symbol of celestial holiness; green passed into the language as indicating a freshness verging upon unintelligence. If we had the good fortune to live in a world in which the sky was green and the grass blue, the symbolism would have been different. But for some mysterious reason this habit of realizing poetically the facts of science has ceased abruptly with scientific progress, and all the confounding portents preached by Galileo and Newton have fallen on deaf ears. They painted a picture of the universe compared with which the Apocalypse with its falling stars was a mere idyll. They declared that we are all careering through space, clinging to a cannon-ball, and the poets ignore the matter as if it were a remark about the weather. They say that an invisible force holds us in our own armchairs while the earth hurtles like a boomerang; and men still go back to dusty records to prove the mercy of God. They tell us that Mr. Scott's monstrous vision of a mountain of sea-water rising in a solid dome, like the glass mountain in the fairy-tale, is actually a fact, and men still go back to the fairy-tale. To what towering heights of poetic imagery might we not have risen if only the poetizing of natural history had continued and man's fancy had played with the planets as naturally as it once played with the flowers! We might have had a planetary patriotism, in which the green leaf should be like a cockade, and the sea an everlasting dance of drums. We might have been proud of what our star has wrought, and worn its heraldry haughtily in the blind tournament of the spheres. All this, indeed, we may surely do yet; for with all the multiplicity of knowledge there is one thing happily that no man knows: whether the world is old or young.